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ABSTRACT

A rhetorical analysis of the 1984 vice-presidential debate between George Bush and Geraldine Ferraro was conducted to determine argumentation tactics, argumentation flaws, reasoning strategies, and other rhetorical characteristics. The results indicated that the format of the debate allowed for little actual direct confrontation between candidates. In terms of differences in actual rhetorical/argumentative characteristics between the candidates, it appears that Bush employed more direct statements of policy, provided development and explanation more frequently, used support and evidence more frequently, and employed more loaded language than did Ferraro. However, Bush used unfamiliar jargon and ineffective transitions in his messages more frequently, and relied more often on analogies, historical references, and factual illustrations than did Ferraro. Bush used two-sided messages more frequently than his opponent, while Ferraro used the "shotgun blast" technique and attacked her opponent more frequently than did Bush, in the tradition of a challenger role in a debate. The questions given to Bush were more often hostile and leading, while those given to Ferraro were more often hypothetical or speculative. Both candidates relied heavily on talking about the position of the opponent's party ticket and on emotional appeals, primarily focusing on commonly held values. (HTH)

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A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 1984 BUSH-FERRARO VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to provide a rhetorical analysis of the single 1984 vice-presidential debate between George Gush and Geraldine Ferraro. The debate was analyzed specifically in terms of the emergent argumentation tactics, argumentation flaws, reasoning strategies, and other selected rhetorical characteristics. The results and implications are discussed.

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 1984 BUSH-FERRARO VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Introduction

Sandwiched in between the two nationally televised debates between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale during the 1984 General Election campaign was the second vice-presidential debate ever held in history. The major party running mates met for their encounter on October 11, 1984, at the Philadelphia Civic Center.

The debate was rhetorically remarkable in two respects. Initially, it represented the only other such encounter between vice-presidential candidates beside that between Walter Mondale and Robert Dole in 1976. Additionally, it involved a female contender. Only Shirley Chisholm had ever participated in a nationally televised presidential debate, either during the primary or General Election campaigns; in her case, it had been a primary debate in California in 1972 showcased on ABC's "Issues and Answers." Naturally, the nation, as evidenced by the viewership, was quite curious about how the Congresswoman from Queens would perform against an incumbent vice-president.[1] As Newsweek previewed the importance:

> The national stage in Philadelphia is Ferraro's best chance to establish herself with the voters. Her task is to capitalize on the curiosity about her status as the first woman nominated for veep by a major party and to convert that curiosity

into support.[2]

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to provide a rhetorical/argumentative analysis of the single vice-presidential debate of the 1984 General Election campaign between Republican George Bush and Democrat Geraldine Ferraro. In addition to examining rhetorical/argumentative characteristics of the contenders, the research critically examined the phrasing of the panelist questions posed to them. Specifically, the analysis was designed to provide documentation of the emergent candidate argumentative tactics, argumentative flaws, and reasoning strategies. All too often, attention is focused on attempts to garner some measurement of debate effects. This paper limits its attention to the salient argumentation strategies.

The Debate Forum

The ninety-minute debate was broadcast by all the major television networks. The moderator for the event was Sander Vanocur, of ABC News. Four panelists acted as interrogators for the event: John Mashek, of U.S. News & World Report; Jack White, of Time Magazine; Norma Quarles, of NBC News; and Robert Boyd, of Knight Ridder Newspapers.

The same format was employed for this debate as for the two Reagan-Mondale presidential debates. The first half of the debate focused on domestic affairs; the second half focused on foreign affairs. Eight main questions and eight follow-up questions were posed to each of the contenders.

Single rebuttal opportunities were provided to the candidate at the completion of each round of questions. Four-minute closing statements were allocated to each of the contenders. Candidate responses to initial questions were limited to two and a half minutes; candidate responses to follow-up questions and candidate rebuttals were limited to one minute. The first four rounds of questioning were directed at domestic affairs; the second four rounds of questioning were directed at foreign affairs. Candidate closing statements were not limited on subject matter.

Methodology

The research was conducted through a content analysis of a videotape of the debate and a verbatim transcript of the debate provided by the League of Women Voters. The two authors made independent judgments on each rhetorical characteristic analyzed so as to achieve a reasonable degree of inter-rater reliability on assessment of the candidates.

Nine argumentative tactics were looked for in the candidates' messages:[3] (a) direct statement of policy, (b) development and explanation, (c) rhetorical questions (answered/unanswered), (d) redundancy, (e) support and evidence, (f) restatement of position at conclusion, (g) opponent positions, (h) loaded language, and (i) emotional appeals.

Four argumentation flaws were looked for in the candidate messages: (a) unfamiliar jargon, (b) lack of development and explanation, (c) ineffective transitions in poorly developed

or explained messages, and (d) message contradictions. These four factors are considered to be significant mistakes in any debating forum. All subtract from the persuasive potential of the messages, thus serving to obfuscate the topic in question.

Five reasoning strategies were noted for their prevalence in the candidate messages: (a) literal analogies, (b) figurative analogies, (c) historical references, (d) factual illustrations, and (e) hypothetical illustrations. All are appropriate means of providing support for specific arguments.

A number of other message tactics were looked for in the candidate messages: (a) humor; (b) direct references to the opponent; (c) one-sided versus two-sided presentations; (d) pre-emption of the opponent's attack; (e) the "shotgun blast" (denunciation of the opponent's character, record, positions, or campaign); (f) the "laundry list" (a series of difficult and often incriminating questions); (g) direct challenges to the opponent; (h) "turning the tables" (redirecting the essence of an opponent's attack back at him/her); (i) flat denial of an attack line; (j) quotable, compelling lines (Ferraro: "Let me just say, first of all, that I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude." . . . Bush: ". . . if he [Mondale] see--somebody sees--a silver lining, he finds a big black cloud out there. Whine on Harvest moon.");[4] (k) the highlighting of opponent evasiveness; (l) "tossing bouquets" (complementing the opponent); and (m) the apology or confessional.[5] Candidate attack/refutation ratios were also calculated.

In addition to the rhetorical characteristics examined

with the candidate messages, the phrasing of the panelist questions was analyzed for thirteen possible descriptors: (a) hostile, (b) speculative/hypothetical, (c) overspecific, (d) leading, (e) value laden, (f) question begging, (g) multifaceted, (h) vague and unfocused, (i) bipolar, (j) two-in-one, (k) loaded, (l) prior statement, and (m) associating a response with a desirable goal.[6]

Each characteristic examined was noted for its presence or non-presence in each candidate message; if a particular rhetorical characteristic were noted to be present in a candidate message, it was only counted once, not for each specific time it appeared within that message.

Results

Both candidates had the opportunity to convey 24 messages during the debate. Though it was a highly structured debate, Bush utilized approximately a minute and a half more time in relaying his positions than did Ferraro. For his 24 messages, Bush consumed 2,095 seconds (34 minutes, 55 seconds), for an average of 87 seconds per message. For her 24 messages, Ferraro consumed 2,002 seconds (33 minutes, 22 seconds), for an average of 83 seconds per message. In examining the number of messages conveyed by the candidates and the time frame involved, it is important to note that Ferraro was denied one of her rebuttal opportunities, due to a logistical error in the proceedings, and that Bush waived his last rebuttal opportunity just prior to his closing statement.

The eight main and follow-up panelist question sets basically reflected the "50-50" split between domestic and foreign affairs imposed in the debate's format. Subject matter brought up through panelist questioning in the domestic affairs portion of the debate consisted of: (a) Bush's ideological correspondence with his running mate; (b) the extent of Ferraro's political experience; (c) civil rights; (d) separation of church and state; (e) the abortion issue; and (f) the personal income tax returns of both candidates. Subject matter brought up through panelist questioning in the foreign affairs portion of the debate consisted of: (a) terrorism policy; (b) the use of military force in Central America; (c) Soviet relations--for Bush, Reagan's record of having not met with Soviet leaders during his Administration, and for Ferraro, the nuclear weapons verification issue; (d) Ferraro's lack of military experience as it might impact national security issues; and (e) the single question each candidate would want to have asked of his/her counterpart about foreign affairs issues.

Argumentative Tactics

Bush incorporated direct statements of policy in nearly twice as many of his messages (63%) as did Ferraro (33%). Bush provided development and explanation in considerably more of his messages (75%) than did his counterpart (46%). The candidates incorporated rhetorical questions infrequently in their messages, but did so relatively evenly. Bush posed one and answered it in 4% of his messages; he posed rhetorical

questions in 13% of his messages but did not answer them. Ferraro posed and answered rhetorical questions in 8% of her messages; she posed them but did not answer them in 8% of her messages. Redundancy was employed in only 4% of Bush's messages and none of Ferraro's messages.

Support and evidence was incorporated in considerably more Bush messages (71%) than Ferraro messages (50%). The candidates infrequently restated their positions at the conclusion of their messages, but did so about evenly (Bush, in 8% of his messages; Ferraro, in 13% of her messages). Both candidates discussed the positions of their opponent (and/or his/her running mate) in 54% of their messages. Loaded language was incorporated in twice as many Bush messages (50%) as Ferraro messages (25%). Emotional appeals were utilized rather frequently but equally by the two candidates (by Bush in 50% of his messages and by Ferraro in 46% of her messages).

Argumentative Flaws

Unfamiliar jargon was employed by Bush in 29% of his messages, while by Ferraro in only 13% of her messages. An equal percentage of messages for both candidates lacked development and explanation (13%). Ineffective transitions were featured in considerably more Bush messages (21%) than Ferraro ones (4%). Neither candidate incorporated contradictions in his/her messages.

Reasoning Strategies

Analogies were employed by Bush considerably more often than by Ferraro in the debate. Literal analogies appeared in 17% of the Bush messages, while in none of the Ferraro messages. Figurative analogies were evidenced in 33% of the Bush messages, while in only 13% of the Ferraro messages. Historical references were utilized frequently by both candidates but slightly more by the Republican contender (in 58% of his messages) than by the Democratic contender (in 46% of her messages). Factual illustrations were incorporated in considerably more Bush messages (75%) than Ferraro messages (54%), but were utilized frequently by both. Hypothetical illustrations appeared infrequently in the candidate messages; Bush never used them, Ferraro used them in only 8% of her messages. Deductive reasoning was employed in 4% of the Ferraro messages, but in none of the Bush messages.

Attack/Refutation Ratio

While 42% of the Ferraro messages contained an attack of her opponent (and/or his running mate), only 21% of the Bush messages featured such an attack. On considerably fewer occasions did either candidate rely on refutation comments based on opponent remarks. Bush did so in only 8% of his messages. Ferraro did so in only 13% of her messages.

Other Message Tactics

Humor was employed selectively by both candidates. Bush used it in 13% of his messages; Ferraro used in in 8% of her

messages. These incidences were mainly contained in the candidate responses to questions about their tax records. Bush incorporated a direct reference to his opponent in 4% of his messages; Ferraro did so in 13% of her messages. These references occurred primarily in the singly truly confrontational segment of the debate between the candidates during the fifth found of questioning in which Ferraro accused Bush of patronizing her in regard to her level of knowledge about foreign affairs.

One-sided presentations were evidenced in 8% of the Bush messages, in 4% of the Ferraro messages. In contrast, two-sided presentations were incorporated in 29% of the Bush messages, but in only 4% of the Ferraro messages. The "shotgun blast" was used more frequently by Ferraro (in 38% of her messages) than by Bush (in 21% of his messages). Both candidates directly challenged their opponent in 8% of their messages and "turned the tables," redirecting the line of attack back at the opponent, in 4% of their messages. Flat denial was featured in 4% of the Ferraro messages, but in none of the Bush messages. Quotable, compelling lines were evidenced in 13% of the Bush messages and 17% of the Ferraro messages. Bush "tossed bouquets" to his opponent in 8% of his messages, while Ferraro never did so in her messages. Pre-emption of opponent attacks, the "laundry list" technique, highlighting the evasiveness of the opponent, and the apology or confessional were not contained within any of the candidate messages during the debate.

Initiator of Topics

The format structure of the debate dictated to a great degree the source of topic initiation within candidate responses. Not surprisingly, the panelists were the primary initiators of topics. The panelists emerged as the source of topics in 67% of the Bush messages and in 58% of the Ferraro messages. Bush initiated his own topics in 29% of his messages; Ferraro initiated her own topics in 25% of her messages. Opponent-initiated topics were featured in 17% of the Bush messages and in 25% of the Ferraro messages. Sixteen of each candidate's 24 messages (67%) were in response to panelist questions, while the other eight message opportunities involved rebuttals and the closing statement.

Panelist Questioning

Twenty-nine percent of the panel questions to Bush and 17% of the panel questions to Ferraro appeared to be hostile in nature. Eight percent of the questions to Bush and 17% of the questions to Ferraro were hypothetical or speculative in form. Leading questions appeared to be posed 25% of the time to Bush and 13% of the time to Ferraro. Loaded questions were directed 8% of the time to Bush and Ferraro. Value-laden questions appeared in 17% of the cases to Bush and in 13% of the cases to Ferraro. Multifaceted questions were given to Bush 25% of the time and 17% of the time to Ferraro. Prior statements preceded 54% of the Bush questions and Ferraro questions. Question begging appeared in only 8% of

the Ferraro inquires. None of the debate questions contained phrasing which made them appear as overspecific, vague or unfocused, bipolar, two-in-one in form, or as associating a response with a desirable goal.

Discussion

This paper has attempted to focus upon an integral component of debate, that of styles of argumentation employed by the participants. Ironically, the format of the debate allowed for little actual direct confrontation between the candidates. The format, in fact, primarily imposed a basic "press conference" strategy, with the contenders directing their responses more to the four panelists interrogating them than to one another.[7] Two-thirds of the candidate messages, as dictated by the debate format, were in response to panelist questions. Candidate agendas were only easy to insert with rebuttal opportunities and during the closing statements.

In terms of differences in the actual rhetorical/ argumentative characteristics between the candidates, it appears that Bush employed more direct statements of policy, provided development and explanation more frequently, used support and evidence more frequently, and employed more loaded language than his counterpart. However, the Republican contender used unfamiliar jargon and ineffective transitions in his messages also more frequently. In addition, Bush relied more often on analogies, historical references, and

factual illustrations than Ferraro. Bush used two-sided messages more frequently than his opponent. Ferraro utilized the "shotgun blast" technique and attacked her opponent more frequently than did Bush, basically in the tradition of a challenger role in a debate.

Bush appeared to be given more hostile and leading questions than his opponent, while Ferraro was given more hypothetical or speculative questions than her opponent. Both candidates were given many prior statement questions and to a lesser degree multi-faceted questions.

Both candidates relied heavily on talking about the position of the opponent party ticket and on emotional appeals, primarily focusing on commonly held values. Historical references and factual illustrations were employed by both candidates as reasoning strategies to strengthen the conveyance of their positions.

Vice-presidential debates present somewhat of an anomoly in American politics. The running mate of a presidential candidate is more or less obligated to act as a "mouthpiece" for the top of the ticket, representing his/her views accurately and presenting the appropriate image. The vice-presidential contender thus becomes trapped in the debate by the need to continually reinforce the fact that he/she and the presidential contender agree on all issues and yet challenge the positions of the opposition without misrepresenting his/her running mate.

This paper has attempted to provide an argumentative

analysis of the vice-presidential debate between George Bush and Geraldine Ferraro. The statistical documentation of the debate contained herein provides a record of the strategies employed in this extraordinarily unique argumentative encounter.

Notes

[1] Fifty million T.V. viewers observed the debate. See Walter Shapiro, et al., "Shootout at Gender Gap," Newsweek, 22 October 1984: 29.

[2] Tom Morganthau, et al., "The Veepstakes," Newsweek, 15 October 1984: 41.

[3] Part of these evaluation criteria were originally employed in Larry A. Samovar, "Ambiguity and Unequivocation in the Kennedy-Nixon Television Debates," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 48 (1962): 277-279. See also Samovar, "Ambiguity and Unequivocation in the Kennedy-Nixon Television Debates: A Rhetorical Analysis," Western Speech, 29 (1965): 211-218.

[4] 1984 Vice-Presidential Debate. Official transcript published by League of Women Voters. October, 1984: 20, 8.

[5] Myles Martel provides strong justification for inclusion of these factors in analyzing debates in his book Political Campaign Debates: Images, Strategies and Tactics (New York: Longman, 1983) 85-91.

[6] For further clarification of questioning factors, see Martel, 109-12, and Cal W. Downs, G. Paul Smeyak, and Ernest Martin, Professional Interviewing (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) 52-4.

[7] The non-confrontational aspect of the debate was further reinforced in the T.V. viewer's perspective by the lack of "reaction" shots. The cameras, with small exception, focused only on the speaking participant.